

Online or Face-to-Face? Which Class to Take

“Hey Mom and Dad, can I take my English class online? I was invited to take a WCATY class next semester.”

What????? Being a parent of a middle school child (and a middle school teacher educator) is never dull. We know that middle school is a time for exploring who one is and might become. It is a time of growing socially and academically. It is a time to develop study skills and career interests that will last a lifetime. This is a tall order for schools, especially those seeking to meet the needs of high achieving, academically talented youth. We were faced with deciding how to meet this challenge in our family when our young adolescent came home one night asking to take an online English class as opposed to the traditional in-school eighth-grade class.

“By the way, the application form needs to be returned to school tomorrow morning along with \$35 to pay for the class.”

Our family was clearly faced with a decision. Should our middle school child stay in the face-to-face English class or take an online class? What would be the benefits of the online class? What would be the drawbacks? What would be best for our child? What did our child want and why?

As you can probably guess, we decided to allow our child to take the online class—actually it turned out to be two classes, a different one for each of the last two quarters in the school year. In this article, we want to share our decision-making processes regarding the online classes, discuss our experiences with the classes, review the literature on online learning, and then make recommenda-

tions on how to make these classes even richer. It was an interesting crossroad, and we are glad this option existed. Does it exist in your school?

The Debate

Can I Take an Online English Class? Student Voice

“Steven, please report to the media center second period Wednesday . . . Would you be interested in taking an online English class rather than your current one? This class looks like it might be more work than your regular English class, but it looks like it will be more fun, interesting, and challenging. It is entitled ‘Building Character: A Writer’s Attempt at Scribbling in the Details’ . . . Permission slips are due Friday.”

When I was first approached with the option of taking an online class through the Wisconsin Center for Academically Talented Youth (WCATY) rather than my current class, I was excited. I thought it would be good to be in charge of my own education, although I was not thoroughly psyched about having to look at a computer for 95% of the instruction. I also liked the sound of the course title. And, as icing on the cake, the four girls that I would be taking the class with said it would be grand fun. Knowing I would have to convince my parents of this idea, I created a list of reasons why the class would be good for me. They included:

- I would have an opportunity to expand my educational horizons.
- I would be working on a computer.
- I would have responsibility for my learning.
- The topic sounds interesting (I like to write).

- Other students said it would be fun.

Now I only needed to recite these reasons in a convincing manner and return the permission slip.

Should He Take an Online English Class? Parent/Teacher-Educator Voice

As a parent and teacher educator of technology integration, the use of technology for learning, including online classes, is not new to me. In fact,

SIDE TRIP: PLANNING FOR AN ONLINE EXPERIENCE

Taking content online requires a great deal of planning and thought. The key to a productive online experience is to mobilize the power of the Internet. It's not as simple as transferring content used in a face-to-face (F2F) experience. Engagement and motivation are important for all kinds of learning, and an online environment is no exception. In planning an online experience, instructors might consider the following:

- Learners still need examples of the thinking and language required of the task at hand. Modeling from the instructor is as important in an online class as it is in a F2F experience.
- Learners like to engage with other people in the learning environment. An online environment provides a number of possibilities, including discussion boards, chat rooms, wiki tasks, and so on. The instructor has to plan for ways that learners can interact with one another.
- Visual information is stored and remembered more easily than text-only information. Online courses can be built around pictures, video, and the vast collection of images available on the Internet. The instructor should consciously integrate visual information with text at every possible chance.

For more information about planning an online experience, I highly recommend Ryan Watkins's book, *75 e-Learning Activities: Making Online Learning Interactive* (2005, San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer) or Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson's book *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* (2004, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass).

—Douglas Fisher

I'm fully aware that online classes are a fiscally viable, technologically accessible, academically sound, educational alternative. However, I was not quite sure why my child needed to take an online English class when he had been successful in a face-to-face English class in the school he attended every day. I also wondered, "If this was a good option for this one student, should it be an option more commonly available to all students?" This was an interesting dilemma.

One of the first areas we considered when deciding whether or not to enroll in the online class was social. Would he become socially isolated since he wasn't in a classroom of students for this one class? Or, since he was with other students the remainder of the day, was this perhaps unimportant. Also, we considered the possibility that perhaps his circle of peers would be expanded as he met and worked with students from other schools. This was a potential advantage, since he is a quiet student with a small circle of friends. As it turned out, there were several students from his school taking the online English class, and they all met in the school media center during the same hour to work on their online class. Thus, they became a social network that previously did not exist. Not only did camaraderie develop in school while they were in the media center, but it extended to after school and weekends in the online environment for both academic and social purposes. As for expanding his circle of peers outside his school, it turns out that students in this online class were all located within our small city. Thus, he was afforded the opportunity to meet local students who simply did not attend his school.

In the academic arena, we had many questions vis-à-vis an online class. Was the work going to challenge him; would he get timely feedback; was the class going to be self-paced; how exactly would an online English class work for middle school students? Since this class was for academically talented youth, we figured that probably it would be rigorous and challenging. Knowing that online classes should have teachers who are responsive, we figured that he would receive adequate feedback on his work. After looking at the class syllabus,

bus, it also appeared to be structured so that it was not strictly self-paced; there were weekly due dates. And, it was not going to be fully independent work. Peer editing would occur throughout the class and a large-group writing project was scheduled for the last several weeks of the class. Each of these points led us to decide to allow him to take the first class.

Online Classes: An Overview

Facts, Figures, Best Practices

Information related to online classes at the preK–12 level is fairly limited. Only recently have national studies been commissioned to explore this educational innovation; the most recent was done by Picciano and Seaman (2007) who surveyed 366 school district administrators in 2005–06. Those who responded to the survey represent approximately 3,632 schools, 2 million students, and 67,000 FTE teachers from every region of the country. Based on their findings, it is anticipated that 700,000 American, public school, preK–12 students participated in online and blended learning courses in 2005–06. This is a dramatic increase from the estimated 50,000 students who participated in 2001 (Carvin, 2007) and a significantly smaller number than the 3.1 million post-secondary students taking classes in fall 2005 (Allen & Seaman, 2006). While a vast majority (67%) of students were high school students, 20% were middle school students. These students most often live in rural areas (45.1%) or on the urban fringes of cities (36.3%). However, nearly two-thirds of all school districts (63.1%) currently have students taking either online or blended courses, with another 20.7% planning to introduce them over the next three years.

The number of online classes students take varies widely. Students may take one or two, or attend a full-time virtual school taking five to seven classes per semester. The breakdown of how many students are involved in each type of learning does not appear to be available. Rather, statistics count each online class taken as a separate experience.

Online Learning Defined

It is important to distinguish between the various types of online learning opportunities. Allen and Seaman (2006, p. 4) offer the most often used definitions differentiating between traditional, Web-facilitated, blended/hybrid, and online learning. Traditional instruction is a course with no online technology used. Web-facilitated courses utilize Web-based technology, such as a course management system to post course assignments, to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. Anywhere between 1–29% of the course content is delivered online. Neither of these types of instruction are what is typically referred to as online learning. Blended/hybrid courses combine online learning and face-to-face delivery with 30–79% of the content delivered online. Online discussions among students are typical as are several face-to-face meetings of the entire class during the course. Extensive teacher-to-student as well as student-to-student interactions are the hallmarks of this type of instruction. Online classes involve delivering 80+% of the course online. Typically, no face-to-face meetings are involved nor is there extensive student-to-student interaction. These latter two types of classes are included in discussions of online learning.

Both blended and online classes can be either asynchronous, synchronous, or a mixture of both. In asynchronous classes, students and teachers work at different times and do not have real-time interaction with one another. These classes are self-paced, but may have regular deadlines that must be met. Synchronous classes meet at specified times, although the meeting may be face-to-face or via another means, such as electronic chat rooms, two-way audio/video, or telephone. Many blended classes are a mixture of asynchronous and

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synchronous learning, with classes meeting at the beginning, middle, and end of the course.

Misconceptions and Valid Concerns

There are quite a few common misconceptions regarding online classes. Some of the more popular misconceptions include the notions that these classes are just a high-tech version of correspondence courses; students spend all of their time in front of a computer; learning is essentially 'teacher-less'; the courses are easy to pass and easy to cheat in; the classes are only appropriate for high school students, highly motivated students, able students, dropouts, or students in need of remediation; it is cheaper than traditional instruction; and students are isolated from their peers and short-changed on important socialization skills. In point of fact,

well-developed online classes . . . are teacher led-with extensive interaction between teachers and students, and often between students. Because the teachers are so closely involved, students find that it is not easy to cheat in an online course. Given that online courses are so interactive, and that full-time programs provide opportunities for students to interact in person, online students are not isolated, but instead can focus on learning and socializing at different times. (Watson, 2007, p. 4)

Social isolation is a valid concern that is being proactively addressed by a number of programs, especially those who enroll students full-time. Solutions include field trips, student clubs, and other extracurricular activities that mix online and face-to-face venues. For example, one school has a newspaper club that produces two newspapers per month. Other schools offer monthly field trips or participation in regional or national competitions. Participation in these activities "is similar to the real world, where companies often have employees from different offices collaborating on projects, and in fact may effectively prepare students for the 21st century workplace" (Watson, 2007, p. 18).

Online Courses Offer Opportunities Not Available Otherwise

Some schools are utilizing online learning to meet the NCLB need to provide highly qualified teach-

ers in all classes. For example, in some schools the highly qualified teacher is online, while the in-class teacher, usually working towards certification, facilitates the class (Watson & Ryan, 2006, p. 11). This is a win-win situation for all involved. Picciano and Seaman (2007, p. 9) found that the top five reasons for offering online or blended learning courses were (1) offering courses not otherwise available at the school, (2) meeting the needs of specific groups of students, (3) offering advanced placement or college-level courses, (4) reducing scheduling conflicts for students, and (5) permitting students who failed a course to take it again. District administrators' additional comments further support these ideas by saying:

- "... Community Schools is a small rural district. We would not be able to provide our students with a quality education without online learning. Students have a wide assortment of classes to choose from." (p. 14)
- "We are very interested in any alternatives to the traditional classroom so that we can meet the needs of all of our very diverse (in many ways) student population. Online or blended courses are one of those alternatives." (p. 15)
- "We feel it is important to offer some online classes to give our students a greater opportunity of classes to select from. We also believe that part of educating a child is to learn social and teamwork skills that need to be done face-to-face." (p. 16)

Julie Young, founder and president of the Florida Virtual School, believes that "Within five years, there will be lots of blended models, such as students going to school two days a week, and working at home three days a week. Another blended model . . . is where a student takes five [face-to-face] courses at school and two virtual courses . . ." (Young, as cited in Picciano & Seaman, 2007, p. 19). Said another way, "[O]nline and classroom instruction are no longer seen as separate entities, but rather part of a continuum of approaches to education which support individu-

alized instruction for every student" (Watson & Ryan, 2006, p. 10).

21st Century Skills

While course availability was an impetus for online programs in the beginning, educators are "increasingly noting an additional, largely unplanned, advantage of online learning: promoting 21st century skills and global citizenship" (Watson & Ryan, 2006, p. 10). In fact, this "is the main reason that the Michigan legislature in 2006 passed the requirement that all students have an 'online learning experience' prior to graduating from high school" (p. 10). This train of thought is also reflected in *A National Primer of K-12 Online Learning* where Susan Patrick, President of the North American Council for Online Learning, notes:

I sense enormous excitement about the promise of online learning to prepare today's students to succeed in an increasingly technology-driven global economy. After all, the young people of this 'Millennial' generation grew up with the Internet and thrive in a multimedia, highly communicative environment. Learning online is natural to them . . . Online learning and virtual schools are providing 21st century education and more opportunities for today's students. (Watson, 2007, p. iv)

In fact, "online education also can facilitate mastery of essential 21st century skills by stressing self-directed learning, time management, and personal responsibility along with technology literacy in a context of problem solving and global awareness" (Virtual Schools and 21st Century Skills, as cited in Watson, 2007, p. 3).

What does 21st Century learning require? According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, six elements of a 21st century education include: Emphasizing core subjects; Emphasizing learning skills; Using 21st Century tools (computers and technology) to develop learning skills; Teaching and learning in a 21st Century context (relevance to students' life, authentic learning experiences, bringing the world into the classroom, and going out into the world); Teaching and learning in 21st Century content (global awareness; financial, economic, and business literacy; civic literacy); and Using 21st Century assessments

(classroom assessments and standardized tests) that measure 21st Century skills.

Virtual schools as well as online and blended classes address 21st century skills in a variety of important ways. Specifically, "[W]hen virtual schools intentionally focus on student mastery of 21st century skills, these schools take full advantage of their inherent strengths. They enable: global awareness, self-directed learning, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, problem-solving skills, and time management and personal responsibility" (North American Council for Online Learning [NACOL] and Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006, p. 5-7).

FAQs

Who Should Take Online Courses?

Can all students be successful learners in an online environment? Perhaps, although not everyone is this optimistic. According to Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005), profiles of successful students are changing, although the following characteristics and skills are perceived to be critical to an online learner's success:

- Being fluent in the use of online learning technologies
- Exhibiting a need for affiliation
- Understanding and valuing interaction and collaborative learning
- Possessing an internal locus of control
- Having a strong academic self-concept
- Having experience in self-directed learning or the initiative to acquire such skills. (p. 39)

Other researchers have identified successful virtual school students as being intrinsically motivated, possessing independent learning skills, liking computers, reading and writing at grade level, receiving consistent parental support and guid-

Can all students be successful learners in an online environment? Perhaps, although not everyone is this optimistic.

ance, being self-directed, having the ability to work well on their own time frame without the structure of a conventional classroom, being involved in activities/hobbies/relationships outside school, having the ability to learn well from visual materials and tests, possessing a positive attitude, and being comfortable in asking for help (Smith, 2001, as cited in Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005).

What Are the Benefits of Online Learning?

According to Watson (2007), there are many benefits to online learning in its various forms:

Students are finding increased opportunity, flexibility, and convenience through online learning. Teachers are discovering a new way to reach students, many of whom were not successful in traditional schools and courses . . . [Furthermore,] online learning is spreading . . . because technology in education is an appropriate, and perhaps necessary, way to educate the many digital students of this generation. For this Millennial generation, technology is an integral part of their lives, essential to how they find information, communicate, and entertain themselves, and they expect their education to be in line with their technology-rich experiences. (pp. 1–3)

It also allows for more in-depth study of topics of

interest, increases availability of courses, and “transcends limitation of time and place” (Watson & Ryan, 2006, p. 10).

Are Online Courses Academically and Economically Sound?

“Although relatively few studies have been conducted comparing online education to physical classrooms, the research suggests that online education is as good as or better than face-to-face teaching and learning” (Watson, 2007, p. 1). As for costs, “[S]ome preliminary indicators suggest that the cost of online courses is about the same as traditional classroom classes, especially within online programs that are relatively new and small” (Watson, 2007, p. 7).

How Do We Recognize Best Practices?

Just because online courses can be beneficial economically and academically does not mean that every online class is of high quality. However, there are qualities for which one can check. For example, is the class aligned with state standards; does it include a variety of assessment options and regular assessments throughout the course; are certified teachers teaching the class (Davis, 2007)? It

SIDE TRIP: COLLABORATION AND THE WRITING PROCESS

This article describes an online course experience from the role of both a student and a parent (who also happens to be an educator!). Both parties cited the opportunities for collaboration as a significant part of the positive experience. The ReadWriteThink lesson plan “Peer Review: Narrative” (http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=122) invites students to collaborate on review and revision. Often, when students work together, we hear, “I liked your story about you and Paul. I think you should add a little more detail and you should change the end two sentences so it will sound better.” That kind of feedback doesn’t really inform the writer. This lesson plan presents the PQP technique—Praise–Question–Polish. This strategy requires group members (usually two to five per group) to take a turn reading their drafts aloud as the other students follow along with copies. This oral reading helps the writer to hear the piece in another voice and to identify possible changes independently. The responders then react to the piece by writing comments on the PQP form. This type of collaboration leads to a more in-depth discussion about the writing process.

—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org

should also include differentiated instruction and multiple learning options (Kevin, as cited in Carvin, 2007). There should be evidence of facility with online pedagogy and management skills: fostering online teams and group projects, creating and sustaining an online community, supporting student-centered (constructivist) learning, initiating and moderating online discussions, and offering credit for the class (Watson & Ryan, 2007). There also should be contact/communication with the teacher (Watson & Ryan, 2007).

What We Experienced

Online English Classes: What I Experienced as a Student

My first day as an online student for this class was as simple as going to a designated website, logging on with the user-name and password I had been provided, and having a nice look around my new English classroom. I immediately saw that online learning would have similarities and differences to regular classroom learning. Class would involve reading some things online, watching YouTube videos, taking surveys online, and a lot of writing and peer editing. With the wealth of information available in cyberspace, it looked like my teacher would never lack interesting things for us to discover and do. Assignments were all to be submitted electronically to my teacher, and I could contact her when I was in need of help. We also had three face-to-face meetings scheduled at the beginning, middle, and end of the quarter. This was exciting, and I was glad I was in the class.

Then it became a whole new ball game. I was required to do work for someone I had never seen before. This was odd. The first time I saw my instructor's face was two weeks into the course when we had our first all-day face-to-face meeting. I also met the other students who were in the class, about 20 of them. There was a teacher in our school, Ms. P., who also kept track of us, but we didn't see her every day. In fact, if I was in need of nagging to get things done, I would have to wait for Mondays and Thursdays when she was in.

Physically, I reported to the computer lab in

the school's media center for class during my regularly scheduled English class. There were three other eighth-graders also taking WCATY classes at the same time. We were not all taking the same class because there were several to choose from each quarter. Some days, we were the only ones in the lab; other days, teachers brought their classes into the lab. We happily coexisted. On days when we were the only ones in the lab, we sometimes quietly talked among ourselves. This built in fun and I got to know these people. It also forced us to accept responsibility. The media center teacher checked in on us, but she had no role in communicating with our online teacher. Rather, Ms. P. communicated with our online teacher regularly about who was falling behind in coursework. If we didn't get our work done at school, we had to do it at home. Assignments were always due on Sunday nights at 8:00 pm.

Another way this class was different from a traditional class was in the learning method. Lectures were replaced by exploring websites or did not exist at all. I liked that. Worksheets were now questions on a screen. This was nice because I could type my answers and I like to type. Since this was a writing class, we wrote and wrote and wrote. We also did peer editing via the Moodle interface. This was rather strange because the peer who edited your paper gave you a grade that wound up in the grade book. I also had direct access to the teacher's grade book, and I could see the grade I received the moment it was graded.

You might be wondering what Moodle is. Moodle is a free, open-source, course management system that was the learning environment for our class. It is what I looked at every day during class. The opening screen was divided into two spaces. On top were the assignment details, including links to readings, inventories, websites, videos, and other resources, plus descriptions of our assignments. In this listing were also links to our instant messenger, forum, Wiki, and class dictionary. At the bottom of the page was a textbox where we submitted our assignments. I did all my writing in a word processing program, then pasted it into the text box for submission and grading. I used

the instant messaging function quite a bit to ask the teacher questions and for social calls with other students. Sometimes the teacher posted questions that we had to respond to. We also had to respond to other students' responses. It was like an in-class discussion, but it took place online. We used the forum function for this activity. Debates often raged on for days and were a good way to get us to communicate with each other. We used the wiki for collaborative writing during our novel unit. Last, we built a class dictionary using a wiki. In this activity, we could get extra credit when we read by entering in words we did not know and then defining them.

Now a bit about the classes I took. I took two online English classes during the second half of my eighth-grade year, one per quarter. The first one was called *Building Character: A Writer's Attempt at Scribbling in the Details*; the second was *Social Psychology*. The assignments varied from class to class but followed a similar format: step one, visit some website, and step two, do something. For example, in my *Building Character* class, we were instructed to go to many personality surveys and answer the questions as though we were one of the characters we were developing and not ourselves. We would then write a quick response describing whether we thought the results fit the character. Or, we would have to write an anecdote where this personality trait was showcased. We also had regular response questions about a variety of things. One sticks out in my mind from my *Social Psychology* class when we were required to define a couple of words and write about a time we had violated a social norm. We were also asked to think about where we learned these traits and how they are enforced. It was required that we put this into a chat-room type forum and comment on other peoples' responses. Another interesting assignment in my *Building Character* class was when we had to watch a YouTube video about a really angry business person. We then had to describe him, tell what we thought he was up to, and write an emotional dialogue for the character.



Steven participates in an online writing class.

In my *Building Character* class, we spent the first half of the quarter developing a variety of characters. In the second half, we worked in groups of four writing a novel that included some of the characters we developed. The novel was eight chapters long, with each person writing two chapters and editing two other chapters. We used the Wiki function for this, with each chapter being its own Wiki. Only the people in our group, plus the teacher, had access to each Wiki. Because each chapter was separate, people worked at their own pace in writing and editing them. This caused a bit of stress at the end when we had to tie them all together to form a novel. It was also extra stressful because that week fell during our school's spring break, and I was out of state visiting my grandmother. But she has the Internet, so I was able to contribute to the editing as easily as if I had been home. In the end, we had a great book. I've never written anything that long before. The book was 80 pages!

I also mentioned earlier that we had three face-to-face, all-day meetings in each class. The first meeting took place during the second week of class, the second meeting in the middle, and the third at the end of the quarter. In the face-to-

face meetings, we were presented with new projects, engaged in community-building activities to meet other people in the class, gave presentations, and did many of the things done in a regular class. These were generally a lot of fun because it was a day out of school in a more relaxed classroom setting. It also gave me the opportunity to see the other people in the class, rather than just their words, and to see and get to know our teacher a bit.

The two classes I took were quite different. In the first class, there was a bit of a problem with the workload. The first week started with homework galore, finally lowering to normal eighth-grade levels around a week before the class concluded. This was stressful. After several weeks of nonstop homework, I began to wonder how in-touch our physical instructor was with her physical students that were connected through this very not-so-physical thing. Fortunately, Ms. P, the onsite person in charge of us, must have contacted the instructor who later decreased the workload a tad.

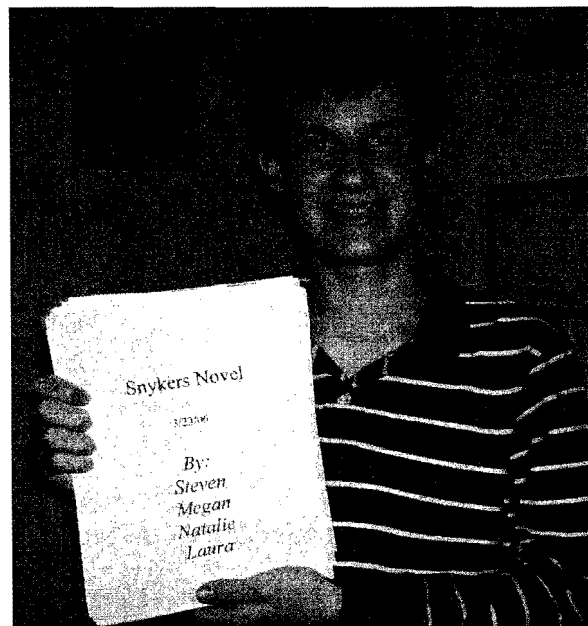
My other online class experience was almost the polar opposite of the one mentioned above. The instructor had very little work to be done throughout the entire quarter. The students were left to do one response question and work on a project each week. It was rather dull because the teacher did not use many of the tools available to her online.

Personally, I liked the first class much more than the second. I was challenged, and I felt like I got to know the teacher more. In the first class, I talked with the teacher a lot using instant messaging. I often asked her for help in clarifying the assignments, and she gladly provided it. What was really nice was that she tended to be online in the evenings when I was at home submitting my assignments. When I saw her online, I often rang her (in the instant messaging feature, you can see who is online and then click their name and send them a message) to say hi, how's it going? Other times, I asked for clarifications on assignments. I didn't do this in my second class because the work was much easier and I didn't need to ask ques-

tions. It wasn't a challenging class. I didn't feel engaged or as if I knew the teacher.

So you might be thinking, what can you, as the middle school classroom teacher, do to give your students the best possible online experience? The answer? First off, give students a chance. If they are not succeeding in your normal class, maybe they will do well in an online alternative. Watch your students as they navigate through the online learning environment. If a student is not doing the work, the only way their online instructor can directly bug them is online. This is, of course, futile if the student does not log on to check their messages. Also, make sure someone is checking in on them to make sure the workload is just right. It is also necessary to make sure your students in the online environment are not suffering from isolation. It made my online learning experience much more enjoyable to have a few other kids in the computer lab that were taking the same class at the same time.

Last, to finish off my little blurb, I would like to make the comment that I was extended opportunities to take classes that would never have been offered at my school, and I am better for that. My writing skills improved far more in one quarter in



A finished collaborative writing project offers a unique learning opportunity.

The Southern Regional Education Board (November, 2006) has developed a detailed document, *Standards for Quality Online Courses*, that includes these five standards:

- The course provides online learners with engaging learning experiences that promote their mastery of content and are aligned with state content standards or nationally accepted content.
- The course uses learning activities that engage students in active learning; provides students with multiple learning paths to master the content based on student needs; reflects multicultural education, and is accurate, current, and free of bias; and provides ample opportunities for interaction and communication student to student, student to instructor, and instructor to student.
- The course uses multiple strategies and activities to assess student readiness for and progress in course content and provides students with feedback on their progress.
- The course takes full advantage of a variety of technology tools, has a user-friendly interface, and meets accessibility standards for interoperability [i.e., works across various platforms such as Mac and PC] and access for learners with special needs.
- The course is evaluated regularly for effectiveness using a variety of assessment strategies, and the findings are used as a basis for improvement. The course is kept up to date, both in content and in the application of new research on course design and technologies.

Within the course itself, instructional conditions or design principles should be followed, including (Driscoll, 2000, p. 382):

- Embed[ing] learning in complex, realistic, and relevant contexts
- Provide[ing] for social negotiation as an integral part of learning
- Support[ing] multiple perspectives and the use of multiple modes of representation
- Encourage[ing] ownership in learning
- Nurture[ing] self-awareness of the knowledge construction process

Authentic learning activities should be used. According to Reeves, Herrington, and Oliver (2002, p. 2), one can tell they are authentic if they:

1. have real world relevance
2. are ill defined, which requires students to define the tasks and subtasks needed to complete the activity
3. comprise complex tasks for students to investigate during a sustained time period
4. provide the opportunity for students to use a variety of resources to examine the task from different perspectives
5. provide learners with the opportunity to collaborate
6. provide students with the opportunity to reflect and involve their beliefs and values
7. can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and extend beyond domain-specific outcomes
8. are seamlessly integrated with assessment
9. create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else
10. allow competing solutions and diversity of outcomes.

Figure 1. Characteristics of High-Quality Online Courses

my first online WCATY class than they had in years of traditional classes. I am now a high school freshman taking an online class on aviation that will probably never be offered at my high school. This is a great opportunity. It is interesting and quite different than the English classes I took last year. I'm glad it is available.

Online English Classes: What I Observed as a Parent/Teacher Educator

Academically, we were very pleased with the outcomes of the first class. The entire quarter course was delineated starting on day one. Due dates were clearly stated with readings and other assignments

due at specific times throughout the week and occasionally on weekends. Human interaction was extensive, including peer editing where students posted their work for review, then edited it based on feedback. Interactions with the teacher were also excellent. Many times Steven would be working on assignments in the evening and the teacher would be online, so they would instant message one another with questions or a cheery hello. The teacher also used emoticons and an avatar to add personality to the site. Thus, he felt a connection to the teacher. Last, the work proved to be challenging. The focus of the class was on writing and character development. Weekly writing assign-

ments were due for the first six weeks. Then the students engaged in a major group-writing project—an eight-chapter book coauthored by the group of four—using the characters and skills they had developed earlier in the class. He is still proud of the 80-page book they created!

Our fears of isolation and lost instructional time were not realized. Rather, Steven seemed more connected, more challenged, and more engaged in learning than ever before. He also developed self-confidence through this class. He found that he could write on demand. He also thrived in an environment where he was trusted to go into the media center and work in an unsupervised area. He became more responsible and had to work with deadlines. If an assignment was due at 8 p.m., it was up to him to get it submitted by then. He also enjoyed the flexibility of having assignments due on non-school days, i.e., Sunday at 8 pm. This allowed him to work when he was alert and less pressured by other school tasks. It was also interesting to see Steven work when we were out of town visiting his grandmother for a week during the class. No class time was missed because we were not physically present. This afforded us the

opportunity to mix pleasure and work, a real life skill in today's world. He also had the opportunity to collaborate with other motivated students, a circumstance not frequently found in other classes that stress heterogeneous grouping.

Was the technology a problem? No, Moodle, the content management system, was easy for Steven to navigate. Being a tech-savvy student to begin with, it was very intuitive. It was also nice being able to see the entire course outlined from day one so he could pace himself, which was a learning experience. Steven loves being online, so that was an added benefit, and when the system was down, even that provided a good learning experience: one should not wait until the last minute to post an assignment. He also learned that sometimes one needs to push hard as a deadline for a group project nears. As the group was editing their book, he spent long hours at the keyboard. This is a real life skill that is important to learn.

Would we encourage others to allow their student to take an online class or teachers to make them available to students? Yes! Given today's technologically focused workplace, learning in this type of environment is a skill that one needs to

One may want to examine the quality of online teachers. The Southern Regional Education Board (August, 2006) has identified 11 standards for quality online teaching. They include:

- The teacher meets the professional teaching standards established by a state-licensing agency or the teacher has academic credentials in the field in which he or she is teaching.
- The teacher has the prerequisite technology skills to teach online.
- The teacher plans, designs, and incorporates strategies to encourage active learning, interaction, participation, and collaboration in the online environment.
- The teacher provides online leadership in a manner that promotes student success through regular feedback, prompt response, and clear expectations.
- The teacher models, guides, and encourages legal, ethical, safe, and healthy behavior related to technology use.
- The teacher has experienced online learning from the perspective of a student.
- The teacher understands and is responsive to students with special needs in the online classroom.
- The teacher demonstrates competencies in creating and implementing assessments in online learning environments in ways that assure validity and reliability of instruments and procedures.
- The teacher develops and delivers assessments, projects, and assignments that meet standards-based learning goals and assesses learning progress by measuring student achievement of learning goals.
- The teacher demonstrates competencies in using data and findings from assessments and other data sources to modify instructional methods and content and to guide student learning.
- The teacher demonstrates frequent and effective strategies that enable both teacher and students to complete self- and pre-assessments.

Figure 2. High-Quality Online Teacher Characteristics

master early. Taking an online class during middle school allows the student the opportunity to explore and grow without having to worry about a high school GPA and credits. It affords one the opportunity to try new experiences and personalities without the social baggage that one carries in a brick and mortar school.

Conclusion

Online learning is a new adventure. When designed carefully, it can open doors for students that otherwise might not exist. Designing such instruction is not necessarily easy, but it is not impossible following the guidelines for high-quality online courses and online teaching (see Figures 1 and 2). We are glad our student was given this opportunity and was successful. Is it an option available in your school? If not, what can you do to make it one? We think you'll find it's worth it.

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